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ENG 2007-001: Creative Writing: Fiction

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2007-001

English 2007-001
Creative Writing: Fiction
Spring, 2003

Current Assignment

Read Williams, "The Use of Force," WF 42; Diaz, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," BSS 15. Burroway, Chapters 1-2.

Work on Exercise #1, Personal Statement.

Last Update: 1/14/2003

SYLLABUS

Course Description: An introductory, workshop-style class primarily devoted to discussion of the students' own work. Early on the approach will be fairly prescriptive, with discussion of model stories and blunt how-to advice on plot, character, style, and narrative form. Later on, in very careful discussion of stories by class members, we'll appreciate and applaud what works, then try to fix what doesn't. Students will be asked to keep a reading journal, to complete a number of exercises, and to write three stories in all, submitting two of these for workshop discussion. Attendance and participation will be very important. Prerequisite: English 1002C. A writing-centered course. To access an updated version of this syllabus (if you are seeing it in hard copy), visit my home page at <http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfjdk/>.

Instructor: John Kilgore. Office: 3331 (314K) Coleman Hall. Hours: TWR 1-4. Phone: 581-6313 (office), 345-7395 (home). E-mail: cfjdk@eiu.edu. When leaving voice mail at the office, include date and time of call, and **do not trust voice mail for urgent messages**—try me at home instead.

Required Texts:

Burroway, *Writing Fiction*, fifth edition (WF)
 Kenison & Tan, eds., *Best American Short Stories, 1999* (BSS)
 Dozois, ed., *The Year's Best Science Fiction* 18th ed. (SF)

Course requirements: regular class attendance and participation; assigned readings in the texts; very careful reading of work by other students; assigned exercises in workbook; group exercise; three short stories of about 1200-2500 words each, the first two of these to be distributed for class discussion; optional rewrite of first or second story, with new grade replacing the old. **The three stories will count for about 60% of the final grade, the workbook about 25%, participation and intangibles about 15%.** I reserve the right to depart somewhat from these percentages.

The textbook. Burroway's *Writing Fiction* is a comprehensive, readable, wise how-to manual for fiction writers. Liberal chunks of it have been included in the assigned readings, and the book is certain to be helpful—eventually—to anyone who does the readings faithfully. There will not be much time, however, for direct discussion of Burroway's advice, as we need to devote precious class time to more focused activities: writing, brainstorming, critiquing one another's work, arguing about published stories. But please do this part of the reading patiently and carefully; eventually you will start seeing some important connections and your writing will benefit from it.

The workbook. Will be a place where important basic exercises are done all semester long, and where (with luck) many stories start. Please be aware, though, that your workbook can be very difficult to read and evaluate unless you take special pains to keep it organized. Accordingly, **please observe the following guidelines:**

- Use a pocket folder, **NOT** a spiral notebook, **NOT** a loose leaf binder, so that you and I can conveniently reshuffle assignments.
- Write your name in large, clear letters on both the inside and the outside of the folder and on every assignment.
- Type every assignment. In-class writings done by hand will sometimes serve as drafts for assigned exercises, but should then be typed up out of class, with revisions as you see fit.
- Make sure every assignment has a date, your name, and a heading and exercise number drawn from the table below (e.g., "Exercise #1, Personal Statement."). **I will not read or give credit for items that lack headings.**
- Since I will often collect several assignments at a time, the due dates do not always correspond to the pick-up dates. Try hard, nonetheless, to do the assigned writings on schedule. You will get more out of class discussions, and have more to contribute to them, if you do.
- Put new work waiting to be graded in the **right-hand** pocket of the folder, in chronological order, earliest to latest. Old, already-graded exercises can be stored in the left-hand pocket, together with other class handouts if you like—but you will probably run out of room by about mid-semester. I recommend that you keep a separate folder for handouts and your classmates' stories. In any case, please be aware that I will read and accept **only** what is in the right-hand pocket, and that **only the exercises that are due** belong there.
- In general the exercises are creative projects that try to a) drill you in fairly specific skills needed by fiction writers; b) stimulate story ideas. With luck some of these will take off and turn into stories, and you are welcome to turn in the same prose twice, though extensive revisions should normally take place between the workbook stage and the finished-story stage.

Stories. Should be the fruit of long and thoughtful revision—third or fourth drafts, put into the very best form you can manage at the moment, though subject (of course) to further revision should you have new ideas after workshop discussion. But this does NOT mean we will or can overlook sloppiness in the basic writing. Clear and articulate writing at the sentence level is a must (yes, even for first-person stories in dialect) because everything starts there. Writing is endless labor (though endless pleasure as well), and publishing writers spend huge amounts of time and energy tinkering, revising, and polishing. They keep dictionaries and other resource books handy and know the rules of grammar (on some level, anyway) even when they decide to break them. Try to follow this example; cultivate your own readiness to take pains.

[A word about grading.](#) (Click here for my harangue on the topic.)

MANUSCRIPT FORM. PLEASE NOTE CAREFULLY! All assignments must be typewritten. Workshop stories should be **SINGLE-SPACED** (to save copying expense), and you must provide multiple copies—two for me, one for every other member of the class. Skip an extra space between paragraphs when single spacing (following the format you see on this page). Please use no fonts smaller than 10 point. The final story will not go into workshop, so it should be **DOUBLE- SPACED** with twelve-point font, and no extra copies will be necessary. Ditto for rewrites. Omit extra spacing between paragraphs on double-spaced manuscripts.

Whenever you hand in something you prefer not to have read by the rest of the class, write "DR" ("don't read") at the top of the first page. I will feel free to read aloud—or even to copy and distribute—anything you hand in that does not bear this warning, though I will not announce your name in doing so.

Attendance policy. Attendance and participation are key aspects of your performance in English 2007. Accordingly, I will take attendance (by means of a sign-up sheet) in every session. The resulting record, adjusted slightly for the quality of your class discussion, will be used to figure a participation grade equal to about 15% of the final grade for the course. Scale for the participation grade: **0-1 absences = A, 2= B, 3= C, 4= D, 5= F; more than 5—continuing**, proportional grade penalties (the attendance grade will become a negative number, averaged into your overall course grade). The effect of this formula, by design, is that perfect or near-perfect attendance will give your grade a healthy boost, while chronic absenteeism will make it impossible for you to pass the course.

Note that you have 1 "free" absence. Use this if you have to, but otherwise keep it as insurance. I will listen

sympathetically to excuses, but **I will not normally award attendance credit for any session that you have missed.** In truly exceptional circumstances, however, I MAY be willing to assign difficult and challenging make-up work for attendance credit. See me if you prefer make-up work to taking the absence. (Hint: It's easier just to be here. Honest.) Note: it is your responsibility to find and sign the attendance sheet at each session, to make arrangements for make-up work if necessary, and to ascertain that the record has been corrected when the make-up work has been done.

Late work. Always get in touch with me BEFORE the deadline if you expect to be late with an assignment; the chances are pretty good that I can grant you a short extension. Otherwise late work will be penalized one grade step (e.g., from B+ to B) for each calendar day of lateness, weekends and holidays included. Pick up the phone, dial my number, and save yourself from this demoralizing fate.

Miscellaneous. There will be no midterm or final examination.

I will be more than happy to grant reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Contact me or the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) if you will be needing such an accommodation.

SCHEDULE

Note: READ AHEAD to make time for writing projects. Be sure to read the stories included in the chapters in WF when they are specifically scheduled for discussion; otherwise they are optional. Exercises are listed the week before they are due. For changes in due dates, which are likely, consult updated version of the above table on the web at <http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfjdk/Litclas/2007/Syllall.028.htm>. Make a habit of bringing hard copy to class to note other changes.

1) January 14, 16

READING: Williams, "The Use of Force," WF 42; Diaz, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," BSS 15. WF, Chapters 1-2.
Exercise # 1, Personal Statement.

2) January 21, 23

READING: WF, Chapter 3. O'Brien, "The Things They Carried," WF 67.
EXERCISE #2, Reading Journal.

3) January 28, 30

READING: WF, Chapter 3. Hood, "How Far She Went," WF 42.
Exercise #2, Reading Journal.
Workbook due on Thursday.
OTHER: Begin Story #1 whenever you feel ready.

4) February 4, 6

READING: Divakaruni, "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter," BSS 29.
Exercise #3, Personal Journal
OTHER: Work on Story # 1.

5) February 11, 13

READING: WF, Chapter 6, pages 181-87 only; Chapter 7, all (but stories are optional). Wolff, "Bullet in the Brain," WF 190. Gautreaux, "The Piano Tuner," BSS 78.
Workbook due on Tuesday.

6) February 18, 20

READING: WF, Chapter 8. Erdrich, "Saint Marie," WF 156. Proulx, "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World," BSS 294.

7) February 25, 27

STORY #1 DUE--IN MULTIPLE COPIES.
READING: Stories for workshop discussion.
EXERCISE #4, Narrative Expansion.

8) March 4, 6

READING: WF, Chapter 8. Workshop stories.
Group Meetings.

SPRING BREAK

9) March 18, 20

READING: Workshop stories.
EXERCISE # 5, Point of View Exercise.

11) March 25, 27

READING: WF, Chapter 5. Stories assigned by Groups..
Group Presentations: 1 & 2 on Tuesday, 3 & 4 on Thursday.
Exercise # 6, Character Studies.

12) April 1, 3

STORY # 2 DUE IN MULTIPLE COPIES.
Workshop.
Begin Story # 3.

13) April 8, 10

Workbook due on Thursday.
Workshop.

14) April 15, 17

READING: "A Small, Good Thing," Carver, WF 344. LeGuin, "The Birthday of the World," SF 42.
Workshop.
Thursday: Optional Rewrites due.

15) April 22, 24

Story # 3 due on Thursday. Keep copy for your records.
Workshop & Misc.

16) April 29, May 1

Review and catchup
Group reading



| Workbook Exercises | |
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| 1. Personal Statement | In about 2 pages, describe your previous reading experience and your goals as a writer. What do you look for in a story? What authors have you most enjoyed in the past? What kind of fiction do you aspire to write? Reach all the way back to childhood, if necessary, for examples of favorite reading. If you simply haven't read any fiction you can recall—well, explain how you propose to write it. Where will you turn for models? (If you end up talking about favorite movies, TV shows, or even comic books, fair enough.) |
| 2. Reading Journal | <p>A) Write tight, vivid, readable capsule summaries, about 100 words each, of at least six stories, choosing freely from any published works you like, including those in our three anthologies for the course. Your summary should give a quick, memorable impression of the story TO A READER WHO HAS NOT READ IT. If you need a model for this kind of writing, look at the beginnings of a few book reviews in (say) <i>The New Yorker</i> or <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i>. The "Briefly Noted" column in <i>The New Yorker</i> might be an especially good model. You might think of each summary as the beginning of a review you don't go on to finish, or as the text for a book-jacket which aims to persuade the browser, in very few words, to buy the book. Think very hard about how NOT to be boring. A summary is a dull mechanical exercise only if you let it become that. The purpose here is to give you lots of practice thinking about the shape and form of stories, about how they are put together—knowledge which should be of direct benefit in your own writing.</p> <p>B) Select two of the stories for further commentary, writing two statements of about 100-300 words defining what you find admirable, well done, thought-provoking, memorable, etc. in these stories.</p> <p>C) This part will be fun. Write either a <i>parody</i> or a serious <i>imitation</i> of the first 2-3 pages of one of your six stories. Make sure you note which one, and remember that your reader may not have read the original. With luck you may find this growing into something you will want to finish; but for now, feel free to break off in the middle of nowhere.</p> |

3. Personal Journal

Write on five different days during the period 2/1-2/8, about 75-200 words per day. If an entry takes off on you, you may continue it for a maximum of one additional session. Suggested topics:

**In the first person, write a reminiscence of a time, a place, or an action that comes from at least five years back in your past. Make the reader aware of the lapse in time that separates the narration "now" and the experience "then." Feel free to fictionalize and invent.

**Capture in writing the voice of someone you know well. As your speaker narrates some fairly ordinary episode, let his or her character emerge vividly, though perhaps inadvertently, through choice of language and detail.

**In the first-person, confess to the commission of some evil or illegal or shameful act. Feel VERY free to fictionalize and invent.

**Describe some person you dislike, using a made-up name, bringing the portrait to life with significant, vivid detail. Fictionalize as freely as you like.

In a sketch of at least 100 words, **capture the most interesting thing that has happened to you in the last three days. Avoid summary. Tell us **nothing** that we could infer for ourselves.

**Overhear a dialogue in some public place. Transcribe exactly what you hear. Then edit the transcript and write an imagined continuation of the dialogue. Note: you won't have to overhear much—dialogue fills up the pages in a hurry.

**Remembering that the impact of fiction depends less on what happens than on how vividly that "what" is realized, write something shocking. Write rapidly and continuously for no more than 40 minutes. If you then can't stand to show me the results, file them and hand in something else.

**Picture the worst thing you can imagine happening to you, happening. Write a sketch that makes this horrible fantasy real. Feel better now?

In the third person, write a detailed sketch describing yourself engaged in some characteristic activity, perhaps a sport or hobby at which you are proficient. **Keep to the third person, but get us into the character's point of view, letting us know what

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| | "he" or "she" thinks and sees as well as what he is doing. |
| 4. Narrative Expansion. | Write the same event or sequence of events as A) a sentence; B) a paragraph; C) a sketch of one and a half to two pages. |
| 5. Point of View Exercise. | <p>In the third person, limited omniscient:</p> <p>Render the same small event or scene or character from the perspective of three or four separate characters. About 2-4 pages. Pointers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember to write in third person, not first. • Nevertheless, the diction in each passage should suggest the inner speech of that character. Good third person narration feels "overheard." • In each passage, restrict yourself all but completely to the perceptions and thoughts of that character. Avoid "authorial intrusions." • Use the character's name sparingly—ordinarily just to signal the transition into or out of the character's point of view. Likewise, phrases such as "Jean felt," "John thought," "reflected Bob," and so on should be kept to a minimum. If the point of view and language are being handled skillfully, we don't need these constant reminders of whose eyes we are looking through. • Sentence fragments and associative transitions can help portray the sense of overhearing a character's thoughts. • You may want one of these passages to consist largely of reverie; but for the most part, concentrate on capturing, not the character's "inner thoughts," but the external world as it appears to that character. • Try NOT to make any of the fragments a complete anecdote. Imagine each as a fragment of some larger whole. In most cases you will be better able to concentrate on point of view if you don't get busy finishing or developing the story. • One or more of your characters may be an "unreliable viewpoint." In fact, point of view characters in third person fiction are nearly always at least a little unreliable. • Remember that our emotions and beliefs color our perceptions, and try to capture this effect in your sketches. • You may use different tenses for the different fragments, and you may want to have the characters recall or perceive the same event (or place, person, etc.) from different temporal distances. |
| 6. Character studies. | Sketches of 2-3 strangers observed on the sly, about 150 words each. Plus: a character study profiling someone you know well, filled with the concrete details that show who this person is; about 300 words. |